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PORTRAITS
OF
PATRICK HENRY

BY
CHARLES HENRY HART

Remarks before The Numismatic and Antiquarian
Society of Philadelphia
April 17th, 1911

PHILADELPHIA
REPRINTED FROM PROCEEDINGS

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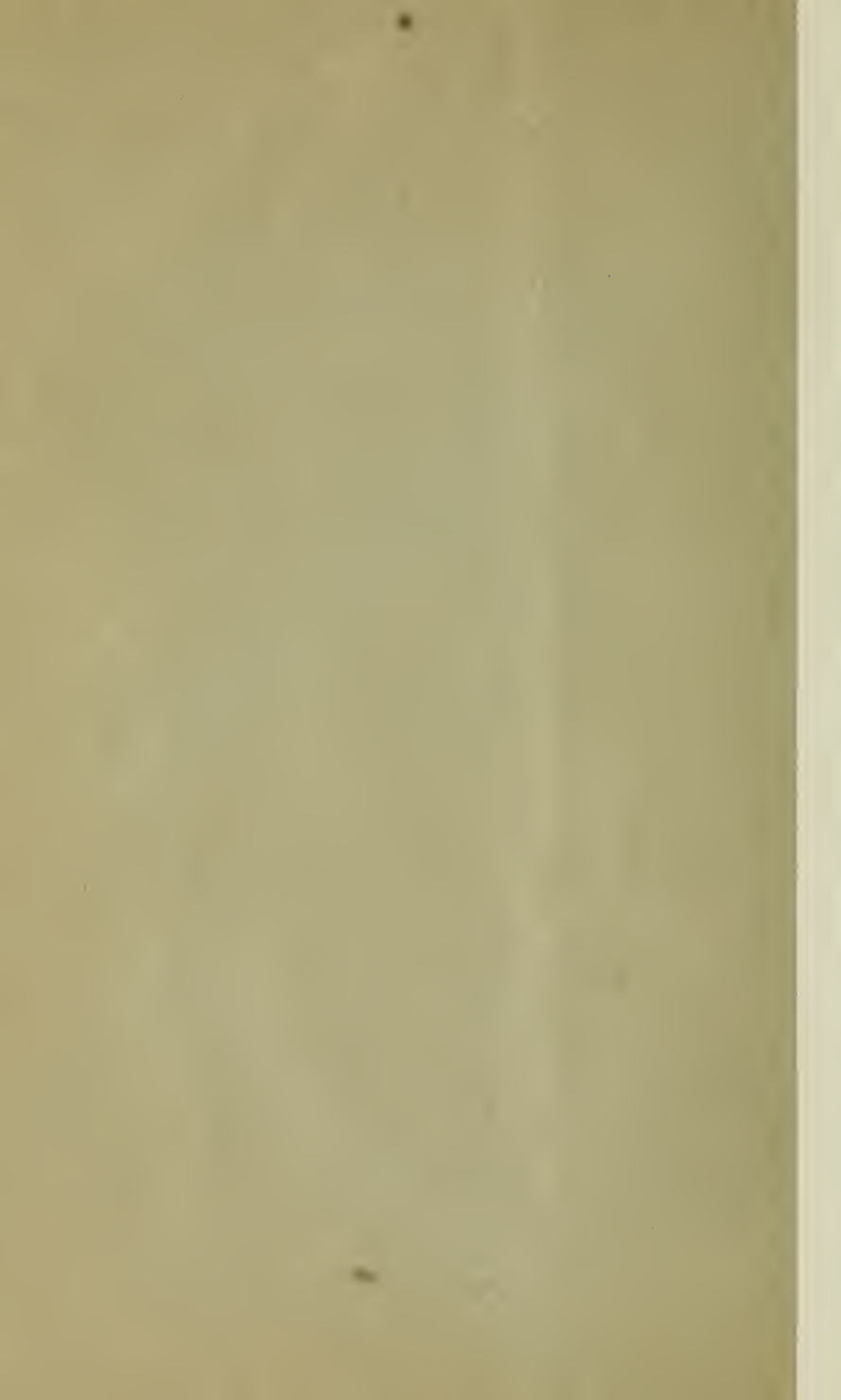




Fig. 32. Patrick Henry, from original miniature on ivory, painted by Lawrence Sully, 1795, in possession of Gilbert S. Parker, Esq., Phila.

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THE MINIATURE AND PORTRAITS OF PATRICK HENRY.

BY CHARLES HENRY HART.

(Remarks made at the Meeting of the Society, April 17, 1911.)

It may be of interest to the gentlemen present to hear some account of this miniature exhibited by Mr. Parker (Fig. 32), as also of the Thomas Sully portrait of Patrick Henry. It was purchased by Mr. Parker in this city at the sale of December 10, 1910, where Mr. Hamilton obtained the interesting memorials of Henry that he has exhibited to-night, but the miniature was not a part of the "Henry Collection" and its great iconographic importance is that until its appearance there was no authentic original life portrait of Henry known.

In 1875-76, I was associated with the commission for the restoration of the old State House or Independence Hall and for the formation of a National Museum therein, and it was deemed very desirable to obtain for the gallery of historical portraits in the museum one of Patrick Henry. To this end our energies were bent, with the result that we could find no authentic portrait of him, the commonly accepted one having been painted by Thomas Sully in 1815, or sixteen years after Henry's death. This posthumous portrait was made from a portrait of Captain James Cook, the circumnavigator, by Nathaniel Dance (Fig. 33), to which portrait Henry bore such a strong resemblance that it was given to Sully for his base and guide for the portrait he was engaged to make of Henry, modified by suggestions from persons who had known the Virginian orator in life. It was painted by Sully for the purpose of being engraved as the frontispiece to William Wirt's "Life of Patrick Henry," published in 1817, and it was so engraved by William S. Lency and published by James Webster. (Figs. 34 and 35.)

My authority for the genesis of this Sully portrait of Patrick Henry was his grandson, the Hon. William Wirt Henry, of Richmond, who a quarter of a century later published the life and writings of his grandfather, but who, in the lapse of twenty-five years underwent, for some unexplained reason, a change of heart

on the subject from what he previously had, as will appear from his statement on p. 651 of Vol. 2 of his biography. He writes regarding the Sully portrait of Patrick Henry:

“The author received the following information from his father John Henry, the youngest son of Patrick Henry, in regard to the Sully portrait, from which the etching in the first volume has been made. During the trial of the British Debt cause in the United States court at Richmond, a French artist attended and painted a miniature of Patrick Henry, representing him as speaking. The artist presented the miniature, set in gold, to Mr. Henry, who afterwards gave it to the wife of his half-brother, Mrs. John Syme. While Mr. Wirt was preparing his life of Patrick Henry, he was allowed by the Flemings, descendants of Col. Syme, to have a portrait painted by Thomas Sully, of Philadelphia, from the miniature. The artist copied the miniature with some slight alterations as to the wig, suggested by Chief Justice Marshall. The portrait when completed was intrusted to Mr. James Webster, the publisher of Mr. Wirt's life of Henry, in order that it might be engraved for the forthcoming volume. Afterwards Mr. Wirt while Attorney General of the United States presented the portrait to John Henry, who was living at Red Hill with his mother. He was too young when his father died to have remembered him, but his mother and older brother and sisters pronounced it the best likeness they ever saw of Patrick Henry. John Henry gave this portrait at his death to the author.”

I knew Mr. William Wirt Henry personally. He was one of the orators at the centennial celebration held in Independence Hall on July 2, 1876, in commemoration of the introduction into Congress of the “Resolutions respecting Independancy,” when a congress of authors convened, each one bringing a biographical sketch of a revolutionary worthy, and as the sequel will show the history he gave shortly prior to this occasion of the Sully portrait of Patrick Henry was the correct one and the story he subsequently remembered having been told by his father an apocryphal one. This is made clear and emphatic by the production of the original miniature that belonged to the Syme-Fleming family and comparing it with the Sully painting and the latter again with an engraving of Dance's portrait of Captain Cook.

My investigation of the portraits of Patrick Henry rested until 1904, when I was engaged in selecting and editing the two hundred illustrations for the five volume edition of

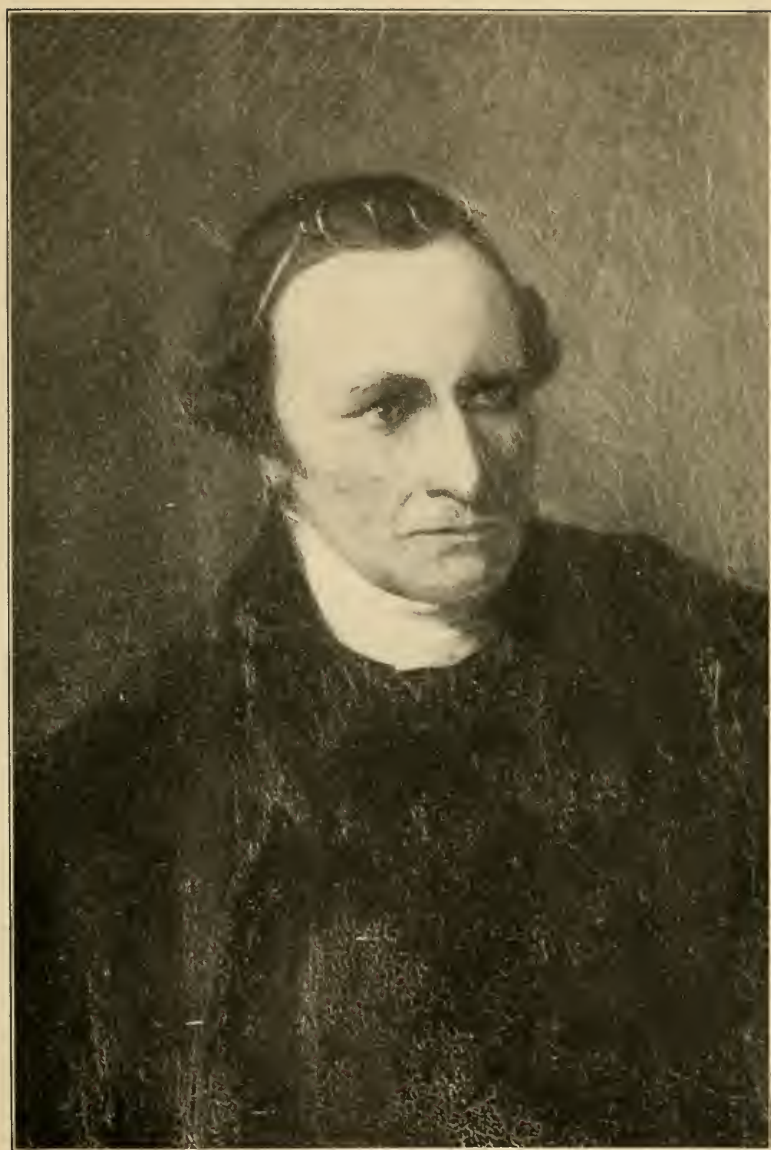


Fig. 34. Patrick Henry, painted by Thomas Sully, in possession of Charles L. Hamilton, Esq., Phila.



I have been shown a printing of the late Mr. Henry
Sully now in possession of Mr. Webster
which I think a good likeness

J. Marshall
Dec. 30. 1816

I agree with Mr. Marshall in his opinion
above expressed.

FRANCIS COVING

I agree with the above Gentlemen in
their opinions respecting the late Mr. Henry
Sully
John Pursheman
14th Dec. 1817

Fig. 35. Endorsement of Thomas Sully's Portrait of Patrick Henry.

Elson's "History of the United States," published by the Macmillan Company, where a portrait of Henry would have been a very desirable addition, and as in the intervening years since the Centennial a rumor had gotten abroad that there was a miniature of Henry in existence in Virginia I made an earnest hunt to discover it. I knew that, circa 1833, E. Wellmore had engraved for the "National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans," issued by Longacre and Herring in this city, a portrait of Patrick Henry "from a painting by J. B. Longacre after an original miniature in possession of John S. Fleming, Esq., of Virginia." With this knowledge I wrote to every Fleming in Virginia whose name and address I could obtain as well as having my quest noted in the Richmond newspapers, but all without avail, so that Henry's portrait does not appear in Elson's history. Subsequently Mr. George Morgan, of this city, who wrote "The True Patrick Henry," became interested in the search and by the aid of Miss Gilberta S. Whittle, a literary woman in Richmond, who had been of assistance to Mr. Morgan in the preparation of his book, the miniature shown this evening by Mr. Parker was found in the possession of John S. Fleming, Professor of Mathematics in the Virginia Mechanics Institute, Richmond, Va., who had kept it not only sacredly but secretly for fear some one might copy it. This was after the sale of "The Henry Collection" had been announced to take place on December 10, 1910, of which Mr. Fleming was informed, and on the 29th of November the miniature was sent by special messenger from Richmond to Mr. Morgan, who placed it in the hands of Stan V. Henkels, the well known auctioneer, who was to hold the Henry sale, to be sold with that collection. It was just in time to be placed in the catalogue which was in proof, so that it appears under "410 A," the "A" showing that it was an insert after the catalogue had been prepared, "410" being the Sully portrait of Henry. The catalogue states: "This is the original much-sought-after miniature of Patrick Henry, taken from life by a French artist at the time the great patriot was arguing the British Debt cases in the United States Court at Richmond, Virginia; it depicts him addressing the court, and from this miniature Thos. Sully painted the oil portrait (above described) for Wm. Wirt, his biographer."

At Mr. Parker's request I examined the miniature and at once recognized it as the work of Lawrence Sully (1769-1803), eldest brother of Thomas Sully (1783-1872), an ascription of

authorship that was confirmed by the magnifying glass which revealed the initials "L. S.," followed by the date "1795." Thus was swept aside the tradition, worthless as traditions usually are, that the miniature was painted by a French artist when Henry was in court arguing the British Debt cases, which was in 1791, or four years before the miniature was painted and then by an English artist and not by a French one.

The question has been put: "How do you know that this miniature is a portrait of Patrick Henry?" It is a pertinent question and can readily be answered. It can be shown in two ways: first by the engraving by Wellmore to which I have referred, published seventy-seven years ago, and second by its clear and undoubted pedigree.

Patrick Henry's mother was the widow of John Syme, with one son named for his father, when she married Colonel John Henry, and their son Patrick was born May 29, 1738. John Syme, Jr., Patrick Henry's half-brother, was a man of considerable local prominence. He was Chairman of the Hanover County Committee in March, 1776; a member, along with Patrick Henry, of the Virginia Convention of May 6, 1776, and Sheriff of Hanover in 1790. He was very active during the Yorktown campaign, being Commissary with special charge of keeping the roads in order and had too the guarding of prisoners from Yorktown to Winchester, with power to take paroles and open letters of the prisoners. He was twice married, his first wife being Mildred Meriweather, of the well-known Virginian family of that name, and his second wife was Sarah, daughter of Adam and Elizabeth Hoops, of Philadelphia, her marriage license being issued March 17, 1768. The issue of his last marriage was one daughter named for her grandmother, Elizabeth, to whom her grandfather Hoops bequeathed by his will, in 1771, a legacy of £557,17,1.¹ Elizabeth Syme married in 1786 George Frederick Augustus Fleming, and of their eleven children a son born in 1791 was named for his grandfather John Syme Fleming. Patrick Henry was much attached to his half-brother John Syme and gave this miniature by Lawrence Sully to his sister-in-law, Mrs. Sarah [Hoops] Syme, which she in turn gave to her grandson John Syme

¹ Adam Hoops' personal estate was appraised at £42,079,12, ½, a no inconsiderable fortune in those days, and he was besides a large landed proprietor.



CAPTAIN COOK

Engraved by J. G. Kneller, sculp. 1771.

Fig. 33.



NOTE.—The written endorsement by Chief Justice John Marshall and others that the Sully painting of Henry is “a good likeness” is nothing more than a confirmation of the fact that Patrick Henry resembled the Dance portrait of Captain James Cook. This “endorsement” was unknown to me until after this monograph was in print.

C. H. H.



Fleming, who bore the name of her husband, the half-brother of Patrick Henry, and from him it descended on his death, in 1858, to his son John Syme Fleming, its recent owner, so that its history and pedigree are perfect. John Syme Fleming the elder was a distinguished lawyer in Virginia and a man of the first consequence, while his son of the same name holds the chair of Mathematics in the Virginia Mechanics Institute in Richmond, so that the miniature has not been in the ownership of unknown persons, but always in the possession of persons of consideration in their community, which is a most important element in the pedigree of portraits and other objects of vertu. The absurdity of Mr. William Wirt Henry's statement, followed by the auctioneer, that Sully copied this miniature, with some slight alterations as to the wig, must be manifest to any one comparing the two portraits or, more correctly, the portrait and the picture, for a painting of a man, while it may be an effigy of that man, cannot be a portrait unless it is from life or directly copied from a life portrait. These two are wholly unlike, being entirely different faces. The painting by Thomas Sully depicts a much younger man than the miniature by Lawrence Sully; the pose, features and expression are wholly different and the ensemble is so strikingly like Dance's portrait of Captain Cook that assurance is given of the correctness of the story that this is what Sully copied with some changes suggested by Henry's contemporaries. If Thomas Sully ever saw the miniature painted by his elder brother he could have used it, if at all, only for some of the details of dress, such as the color of the gown, both being red, but in the miniature it is vermilion, while in the oil portrait it is a much darker shade. Was the Sully oil portrait, however, as exact a copy of the miniature as the most accomplished artist could make in the days of long ago without the assistance of the camera for making the enlargement, it could never be anything but a copy, while the ivory miniature remains the only known original portrait of Patrick Henry painted from life, when the artist and the sitter faced each other, a priceless historical treasure.

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WERT BOOKBINDING
JAN 1989
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